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SUBJECT: VIETNAM - AVIAN INFLUENZA TRIPWIRES

REF: A) Hanoi 846, B) Hanoi 467

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The representatives of the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization have provided an Avian Influenza update to major donor missions in Hanoi. They also revisited an outstanding GVN-WHO-FAO request for donor assistance for an "Avian Influenza Technical Support Unit." Such a unit would give the GVN much needed capacity to combat the present AI epidemic and to be in a position to possibly contain a pandemic, when and if clusters of human-to-human transmission of the H5N1 virus begin to appear. Specific needs are outlined below. We recommend that U.S. agencies consider support for this Technical Support unit in their deliberations on AI. End Summary.

CURRENT SITUATION

[1](#)2. (U) On April 7, 2005 the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) resident coordinator convened a meeting of major donors for briefings on the status of Avian Influenza (AI) in Vietnam by the local representatives of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The DCM and USAID chief attended. WHO representative Hans Troedsson summarized the current health situation in Vietnam. AI currently does not represent an imminent human health crisis here; however, it has the potential to become one on short notice. The virus remains deeply entrenched in Vietnam's poultry and eradicating it will require a long-term, concentrated effort. Lack of action could lead to a major health crisis if human-to-human transmission breaks out.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Troedsson noted several recent changes in the pattern of AI that deserve attention. Up to March 2005, the pattern was similar to the outbreak of 2003-04. In that cycle, the outbreak peaked at the beginning of March and then stopped in April. This year cases are continuing well into April. Moreover, some cases are less severe and some individuals have tested positive, but show no symptoms. He noted that the H5N1 virus is infecting more older persons. While more analysis needs to be done, this indicates at least a possibility that the virus may be changing. According to Troedsson, if such a change resulted in a virus that is transmitted human-to-human and at the same time is less virulent, that is having a mortality rate lower than the current 70%, this could in fact result in a much greater risk of a pandemic. Rapid spread is difficult in cases of very high lethality because most of those infected die or are hospitalized before they can spread the virus very widely, he noted. However, it is not known if recent are cases of poultry-human or human-human transmission. Both are possibilities to be considered, since those infected had been in contact with both infected poultry and infected people.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

[1](#)4. (SBU) WHO and FAO representatives agreed that the GVN should continue to give the issue the highest priority, despite possible negative consequences such as harm to the tourist industry. The severity of the problem and potential risk is understood at the highest levels of government, but some at lower levels do not seem to have the same sense of urgency. Troedsson asked that embassies and other donors highlight their continuing concern in their interactions with the GVN. More importantly, he made a plea for increased assistance to the GVN (see below).

[1](#)5. (SBU) Recent interactions between the WHO and the Ministry of Health (MOH) reflect increasing awareness by the

Ministry of the seriousness of the threat of AI. A month ago the Minister believed that the problem was under control. Now MOH clearly indicates that they need and would welcome assistance. In addition, the Ministry has been more forthcoming in providing confidential, informal reports to WHO before each case has been officially confirmed. (Note: Timely informal reports of suspected AI cases are necessary for WHO to maintain an up to date risk assessment for both Vietnam and WHO's international responsibilities.)

COORDINATION -----

16. (U) A number of donor countries have begun to provide assistance. The Canadians will provide a mobile laboratory for testing. The World Bank has been providing assistance under an Avian Influenza Emergency Recovery Project (AIERP) jointly funded with FAO. Laboratories participating in the WHO's international warning network in Japan and the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta) are assisting in genetic sequencing of the virus, necessary to analyze any mutation of the virus and for vaccine development. CDC is also planning to provide assistance to strengthen laboratory capacity and support development of Vietnam's National Influenza Center. OFDA/USAID will pre-position contamination suits for use should there be a pandemic.

17. (U) While these are welcome steps, FAO Representative Anton Rychener and WHO representative Troedsson stressed that the GVN, the WHO, and FAO would like future assistance to be provided under a master coordination plan as recommended in the Second FAO/OIE Regional Meeting on Avian Influenza Control in Asia held in Ho Chi Minh City February 23-25. They also feel strongly that assistance be coordinated with, or channeled through, an Avian Influenza Technical Support Unit (TSU).

TECHNICAL SUPPORT UNIT -----

18. (U) UNDP hosted a special meeting of the "Monthly Donor Group Forum" on February 21 with the participation of the GVN, the WHO, and FAO to introduce the concept of the TSU and to ask for donor assistance (Ref B). Under the proposal, the National Committee for Avian Influenza Control, reporting to the Prime Minister, would have overall oversight of the TSU. However, a special TSU oversight committee would consist of the Vice-Ministers of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and the MOH and the Representatives of WHO and FAO. Long-term technical assistance personnel would staff the TSU, along with GVN counterparts, and assist the various MARD and MOH departments involved. The GVN would contribute heavily in land and local costs to construct bio-secure labs and breeding farms. While the current measures proposed in the plan are largely short term, development of a longer term "Emergency Contingency Plan" is now underway. The current plan prepared by FAO is driven by the following principles:

- Prevent human H5N1 infection and reduce the risk of a global Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) pandemic.
- Improve active disease search, surveillance and early detection for both humans and poultry.
- Consider poultry vaccine use either in field trials or nationwide.
- Improve disease control by preventing the cycling of H5N1 virus between waterfowl and chickens and reducing H5N1 virus reservoirs.
- Provide livelihood support and long term poultry sector restructuring.
- Develop better tools to understand and control H5N1 infection, including diagnostic methods, vaccines, disinfectants and antiviral agents.

WHAT DONOR ASSISTANCE CAN DO -----

19. (U) The creation of the TSU would result in better coordination of assistance and avoid overlap. More importantly, it would give the GVN an urgently needed capability to implement preventive measures and prepare for a possible pandemic. WHO and FAO urged that donors treat this as an emergency rather than a request for traditional development assistance. They distributed copies of a revised version of the February 21 proposal for the TSU, dated April 7, 2005. The proposal outlines a comprehensive approach to immediate assistance needs. It will be revised and expanded so that donor's can see where assistance is most needed. Copies are being emailed as scanned attachments to EAP/BCLTV, USAID, CDC, and HHS). Additionally, WHO and FAO promised to work with the UNDP to create a trust fund that would give donors the option of either contributing specific inputs of technical assistance or commodities as detailed in the plan or providing direct funding into the trust fund, which the TSU then in turn can

allocate. Both WHO and FAO emphasized that the immediate priority is funding to staff and make the TSU operational.

REQUIREMENTS

110. (U) Of the USD 14.7 million called for in the April 7 version of the plan, 8.8 million is requested to help strengthen and expand Vietnam's agricultural surveillance system and laboratory testing capacity.

111. (U) Other needs include construction and outfitting of two Level 3 Biological Safety Laboratories (BSL3) for MOH. The Government of Vietnam currently does not operate a BSL3 laboratory, although the private Wellcome Trust has such a laboratory in HCMC. Such laboratories conduct genetic sequencing necessary for vaccine development and can carry out more sensitive and sophisticated tests for infection than those currently conducted in Vietnam. Donor contributions would also be used to relocate poultry breeding farms to areas that can be made "bio secure." Finally, approximately 14 person years of technical assistance is required for the TSU, in areas such as farmer compensation, poultry industry economics, laboratory technicians, surveillance system specialists, vaccination specialists and a disease search specialist.

COMMENT

112. (U) We are impressed by both the professionalism and commitment of the WHO and FAO staff in addressing the AI issue and share with them and the other donors at the meeting the view that assistance will be more useful if done in the context of an overarching framework shaped by experts on the ground. This constitutes good management, as it avoids overtaxing the absorptive capacity of the GVN which otherwise would have to deal with multiple donors. We hope that U.S. agencies will factor this heavily into any programs under consideration and consult with our country team resources in USAID, HHS, USDA and DoS prior to finalizing additional and welcome resources to this effort.

MARINE